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Why might some employees sabotage their companies?

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There are people who reject policies and norms in manners that can harm the organisations in which they work. Such people may resort to the abuse of office resources, lie to colleagues, participate in blackmail or distribute sensitive, confidential data without authorisation. They may also pull malicious pranks or communicate offensively to stir outrage intentionally.

Such counter-normative behaviours in the workplace, referred to as workplace deviance, can cripple an organisation's well-being. Though deviants may constitute a minority, their impact on productivity, performance, staff morale and workplace culture can be colossal. Lance Ferris, an organisational behaviour and human resources professor at Singapore Management University (SMU), notes, "Deviant behaviours, or behaviours initiated by employees that contravene organisational norms, can collectively cost organisations billions of dollars per year." The fall of Enron and WorldCom provide a case in point. And it is the ballooning costs to organisations that increasingly underscore the importance of identifying the factors that can lead to deviant behaviour.

So why would people conduct themselves poorly in the workplace? One answer to that may lie in a person's self-esteem. In the paper "When does self-esteem relate to deviant behaviour? The role of contingencies of self-worth", Ferris, together with University of Waterloo's Douglas J. Brown and Huiwen Lian, and Wilfrid Laurier University's Lisa M. Keeping, sought to uncover how a worker's self-esteem might impact or induce workplace deviance. They also provide insights on how business leaders might seek to tackle such a thorny issue.

Self-esteem in the workplace

Deviance occurs when employees are not motivated to cooperate or conform. This can be due to how employees feel about themselves - their self-esteem. Two basic perspectives have been put forth to account for how self-esteem might influence workplace deviance. First, it has been suggested that individuals with high self-esteem will tend to outperform individuals with low self-esteem. In other words, a person who views himself positively would be unlikely to engage in deviant behaviour while a person with negative self views would be more prone to negative behaviour. Second, it has been suggested that people with low self-esteem are more reactive to stimuli, such as stressors. When negatively impacted by stressors, they are likely to engage in deviance in response to the stress.

Both of these perspectives have focused primarily on internalised self-esteem levels - whether or not someone has high or low self-esteem. People with high self-esteem are thought to be less likely to engage in deviance, overall, and also, less likely to be influenced by deviance-causing factors such as workplace stressors. However, previous studies that have used these perspectives have had limited success: findings have been mixed, with some studies showing more low self-esteem individuals engaging in deviant behaviours and other studies showing no such effects.

Ferris and his co-authors suggest that previous studies have provided an incomplete picture, as they focused on self-esteem levels (whether self-esteem is high or low) while neglecting what one's self-esteem might be based on or contingent upon. They suggest that if an individual's self-esteem is contingent upon being a competent employee - what they refer to as having workplace-contingent self-esteem - then regardless of whether self-esteem is low or high, they will be less likely to engage in deviant behaviours. "If your self-esteem is contingent on being a good employee, then it doesn't matter if you have low self-esteem, high self-esteem or average self-esteem - you're not going to engage in deviant behaviour because it would make you feel ashamed that you've failed to live up to your own internal standards," Ferris explained.

People whose self-esteem is highly contingent on the workplace want desperately to be good employees. He added, "That desire is going to override any tendencies they have to engage in deviance, owing to low self-esteem levels. In essence, we're arguing that people whose self-esteem is contingent on being a good worker won't engage in deviance, even if they have low self-esteem levels and even if they are exposed to stressors at work. For these people, engaging in deviance would threaten the very core of who they are, because they base their self-perceptions on their performance at work. So to not be a good worker would be profoundly threatening to them."

So does this mean the common view that low self-esteem leads to deviance is incorrect? Not entirely, says Ferris. "We're not arguing that self-esteem levels are irrelevant, but rather that it's only part of the picture. It's not enough just to say that people with low self-esteem will engage in deviance - it's people with both low self-esteem *and* self-esteem which isn't contingent on being a good worker." So people with low self-esteem may be more likely to engage in deviant behaviour, but only if their self-esteem is not based upon good performance at work.

From their study, the authors found evidence that when an employee's self-esteem was low on its own and *not contingent* on the workplace, more deviance was reported. On the other hand, individuals with low self-esteem which was contingent on the workplace reported the same level of deviance as those with high self-esteem. This suggests that low self-esteem, in and of itself, is not enough to cause deviance.

Similarly, while low self-esteem individuals showed a tendency to be deviant in response to negative stimuli in the workplace - known as "role stressors" - the authors found that this was only the case for people with low self-esteem and self-esteem which was also *not contingent* on workplace competence. People with low self-esteem which was also contingent on the workplace were no more likely to engage in deviance, in response to role stressors, than people with high self-esteem. "It is only when one's self-esteem is not staked to workplace competence that one is 'freed' to engage in self-consistent behaviour or to react negatively to role stressors," the authors noted.

While their study suggests that having workplace-contingent self-esteem lowers the rate of deviant behaviour in organisations, the authors caution there may be special conditions where workplace-contingent self-esteem might bring about a *different* kind of deviance. Accounting fraud, polluting the environment to cut costs and cheating customers to close a sale, for instance, represent forms of workplace deviance which can be construed to benefit the organisation. Employees who base their self-esteem on the organisation may engage in these types of acts to help the organisation's bottom line. Alternatively, if self-esteem is highly contingent on job performance and an employee's job performance is actually bad, he could, for example, rig performance reports to augment his performance.

Exceptional cases aside, understanding the esteem-deviance relationship allows employers to explore the possible management of deviant behaviours. From the study, it is clear that deviant behaviours occur a lot less amongst employees with either high overall self-esteem or workplace-contingent self-esteem. But how might managers influence esteem levels or workplace-contingent self-esteem?

Discouraging deviance

The environment in which people work plays an important role in influencing how people view themselves. A work environment which fosters a sense of worthiness, for instance, can heighten employees' esteem. "One should provide employees with an environment which affirms their sense of competence, autonomy and belonging. Such theoretical perspectives are backed up by empirical organisational research which indicates that support from one's leader and organisation, job autonomy, and performance-enhancing role conditions all positively influence job performance," the authors wrote.

On top of reducing deviance, there are additional benefits to raising the self-esteem levels of employees. The authors point to past studies that have demonstrated a high tendency for high self-esteem individuals to adopt positive attitudes - a mindset that will increase employee satisfaction, well-being, and simultaneously, productivity and better job performance.


As for whether or not it is possible to influence the degree to which employee's self-esteem is contingent to workplace competence, Ferris pointed out that not much research has been done to examine this. However, it is likely that supervisors play an important role. Supervisors can try praising, specifically, the employee's positive contributions, actions and behaviours; employees may begin to associate feeling good about themselves with doing well at work. Conversely, punishing employees who do poorly (or who engage in deviance) may cause them to associate negative feelings about themselves with doing poorly at work.


Through the rewarding of good behaviour and the reprimanding of bad behaviour, leaders inadvertently establish norms within the organisation. Ferris added, "It's been argued that the leader's behaviour sets the tone for a lot of what happens in the organisation. So if the leader is strict in dealing with deviance, it will help set norms that deviance is not tolerated." That being said, the literature that links workplace deviance to self-esteem is relatively recent. As such, the authors posit that more work is required to better understand the effects of self-esteem levels and workplace-contingent self-esteem in the work environment. But aside from self-esteem levels and contingencies, what other factors might also influence deviant employee behaviour?

Through the course of Ferris' research, he found that the supervisor-subordinate dynamic can play an important role - employees had a higher incidence of deviance when supervisors were rude or vicious toward them. Also, when employees feel they have been treated unfairly by their supervisors, they would likely engage in deviant behaviour. Studies have also singled out work stressors as a significant contributor to workplace deviance. "The idea is that stress at work is frustrating, and people take it out on others at work or by revenging against the organisation," Ferris added.

In sum, workplace deviance is influenced by many things, including leadership, factors associated with the job itself - such as role stressors - and factors associated with the employee - such as self-esteem. "We've really only started scratching the surface in terms of why people engage in deviance at work," said Ferris. "It's an exciting area, with potentially huge business implications. As deviance presents a rising cost to organisations, organisations are very interested in anything that can help reduce deviance."

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